

PENTHOUSE  
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ssions—which is, perhaps, a question. It is not known if Nixon himself was present at the installation. If the system complemented his existing devices that produced the White House tapes. (In any event, the device picked up with infinitely more clarity every word uttered in the Oval Office, filling the "unintelligible" gaps in the tapes. In addition, the laser device, unlike a tape recorder, the device picked up every individual voice in a room, without the separation of several simultaneous conversations.) It is not known if a laser beam signal was received, but experts believe that such a transmission range of under a

half mile along a clear line of sight. The laser beam must be aimed out a window—it would be deflected by a wall. In the case of the Oval Office it had to go through the panes of the French doors leading to the Rose Garden.

Highly reliable sources told *Penthouse* that one or more senior officials of the Secret Service and the Central Intelligence Agency are familiar with the "Easy Chair" situation in the White House, although they could not say whether they learned of it only when the laser device was discovered and removed early in August 1970, or whether they knew at some earlier date. The sources would not rule out that the late J. Edgar Hoover, then director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was also privy to "Easy Chair."

In any event, this super-bugging of the presidential office looms as one of the most bizarre episodes in the still unfolding story of domestic spying carried out by six successive administrations, but climaxing most spectacularly during Nixon's tenure.

*Penthouse* learned of this bugging of the Oval Office as a result of a lengthy investigation. According to highly authoritative sources, the person who installed the laser transmitter, possibly on a second attempt when an original device did not function properly, is a foreign-born individual employed as a painter by the government and apparently controlled by one of the intelligence agencies. His name as well as a number of other relevant details are withheld from publication to avoid causing suffering and embarrassment to persons innocently involved in this operation.

Investigations by *Penthouse* have also produced the significant fact that officials of the General Services Administration, which is responsible for the maintenance of government buildings, have been under strict orders from the Secret Service since 1970 not to discuss with outsiders anything pertaining to the painting of the interior of the White House. The Secret Service also issued orders that all inquiries on the subject be immediately reported to it. These orders apply to painting foremen and their crews as well as to other GSA employees. *Penthouse* sources were unable to say, however, whether these orders are exclusively related to the "Easy Chair" incident.

BY TAD SZULC

Americans have always believed that the right to privacy is sacred. We shudder at stories told by travelers to the Soviet Union and other dictatorships who take for granted that their hotel rooms and phones are bugged and that they are followed. But now we discover there is literally no place within the United States safe from the illegal snooping of the CIA (which is restricted by law to foreign operations) and the many other government agencies known as the "Intelligence Community." One extraordinary example is the tiny laser-beam transmitter embedded in the wall of the Oval Office at the White House. This transmitter picked up and relayed to a remote recording center every conversation between Richard M. Nixon and his aides, friends, and visitors during at least several months in 1970, the year the former president launched his secret domestic intelligence program. Presidential telephone conversations, including those conducted over "secure" scrambler lines, were also picked up by the laser transmitter.

The existence in the presidential office of this highly sophisticated device, known by the code name "Easy Chair," remains one of the most sensitive, closely guarded, and intriguing secrets of the Nixon period. This knowledge is restricted to about a dozen key past and present officials of the Intelligence Community. But the precise purpose of the operation, the exact identity of those who ordered the installation of the laser device under a coat of fresh paint on the Oval Office wall, and the ultimate disposition of the instrument remain unclear. Nor do we know if tapes were made of

This is the third article in a monthly series on America's Intelligence Community, including the CIA.

curity Agency, except the Chief of Staff for Intelligence of the U.S. Army in Europe; the Investigation and Police Information Division of the U.S. Army in Europe; the Army Criminal Investigation Command; and the Defense Investigative Service. It must be kept in mind that all this spying is outside normal criminal surveillance by law enforcement agencies. In addition, acting on requests from nineteen federal agencies and scores of local law enforce-